

Opening Statement of Chairman Mollohan on Secretary of Commerce

Good morning, Secretary Locke. Welcome to the other Washington. You have a fascinating background and unique qualifications to tackle the problems you've inherited. As Chair of the Subcommittee charged with funding your Department and its several agencies, I look forward to working with you on the incredibly significant challenges facing the Department of Commerce.

In fact, the Department faces so many formidable challenges that we will not be able to discuss all the issues facing all its agencies today. This is not because the Committee is uninterested in tackling the issues that beset the smaller agencies. There is simply not enough time in one day to do justice to all the concerns, and today we choose to focus on the most fiscally significant. It is - sometimes unfortunately - true that the squeakiest wheels get the grease.

From the fiscal behemoth that is Census during its Decennial year, through the critical research and operations of NOAA, the burgeoning broadband issue, the backlog of intellectual property applications, the challenge of ensuring science and technical rigor for economic expansion, the complexities of international trade and all its ramifications, and the necessity of economic development, to the smallest individual agency, the Minority Business Development Agency, the Department is challenged by a diversity of missions and perceived lack of cohesion. It is this Committee's expectation that you, Secretary Locke, will find the common thread among all these diverse agencies and align their interests to bring the Department into the 21st century. If we ever needed a unified Commerce Department, it is now.

The 2010 Decennial has been beset by a lack of management and oversight, a lack of acquisitions expertise, and a lack of transparency by an agency whose culture is perceived as so impenetrable as to be self-defeating. Recent contract modifications have reframed the concerns and renewed some confidence in this agency, but great risk remains and so much depends on the success of the bureau's diligent employees to overcome the obstacles that in many ways were self-created. It certainly doesn't help that leadership, in the form of a new Director, is delayed; that there will have been three different Directors in the three years leading up to the Decennial; and that a new Secretary must guide the process. Last year, deck chairs were being moved around on the Titanic. This year, the Committee expects and the Nation depends on you to avoid the icebergs that await.

Recently, this Committee has heard testimony on the state of the climate and it is nothing short of disturbing. The Nation, indeed the planet, is at a crossroads. Scientific consensus exists that humans are altering Earth's climate. Humans are at risk because the climate is affecting the organisms on which we all depend. Carbon dioxide (CO₂) remains in the atmosphere for a thousand years. No matter what we do now, a projected one half to one degree further warming will occur due to a lag in the atmosphere. As Dr. Susan Solomon, testified, "we can only crank the dial one way, and we've got to decide how far." There is already 30 percent more CO₂ in the atmosphere than there has been for the past 500,000 years. Temperature has increased 1.3 degrees Fahrenheit. More rain is falling as heavy rain. Ocean acidification is becoming a serious threat as the ocean is a carbon sink. The atmosphere is currently at 385 parts per million (ppm) CO₂ and on its way to 450ppm. As a consequence, the oceans have become 30 percent more acidic already and another 30 percent change appears likely. The organisms we depend on have not evolved to deal with the increasing acidity. Coral reefs are a good metric, and more will dissolve than evolve by 2050. This negatively affects our fisheries and our coasts, where the vast majority of people live.

Rising sea levels will compound the problem, and this Committee heard testimony that sea levels will very likely rise by one meter by 2100 as a result of melting ice sheets. In some areas, given the slope of the coast, that means the seas could move inland by more than half a mile. This could drastically alter the coastline worldwide as beach erosion will be highly sensitive to increasing sea levels, and is projected to cost as much as one trillion dollars in GDP.

The Nation needs an agency that can provide the data needed for citizens and communities to adapt to these changes and to mitigate them as much as possible. There is only one agency that is capable of providing this leadership role but it is not structured — or funded — for this Herculean task. This Committee expects you and your new Administrator, Dr. Jane Lubchenco, to ensure the creation of a National Climate Service (NCS), analogous to the National Weather Service (NWS), within NOAA, and to do everything in your power to fund it commensurately with its mission. This includes all of NOAA's line offices, not just the NCS, because the agency is uniquely suited — and tasked — to research, monitor, regulate, produce and archive the data, and collaborate with other Federal and international agencies, States, and local communities, in combating these enormous challenges.

However, in order to ensure that both the NCS and the NWS receive all the data they depend on, you and your new Administrator will have to first fix the National Polar Orbiting Satellite System (NPOESS). Ironically, the former Administrator testified last year, and I quote: "I am not leaving the same problem I had when I came in with NPOESS from my successor." That is debatable. He seems to have had somewhat more success with the next generation of Geostationary Orbiting Environmental Satellite (GOES-R), although GAO still found some cause for concern, and this Committee will rely on you and Dr. Lubchenco to ensure it does not duplicate the messy path of NPOESS.

Underpinning all these challenges is the need to ensure the science and technical expertise exists and is fostered for future generations; that measurements are reliable so that industry can move forward with innovations to combat climate change and meet energy needs; and that the acquisition and procurement process is transparent, technically feasible, and does not bankrupt the Nation in the process. Other critical needs include ensuring a safety culture; modernizing information technology systems to bring them into the 21st century; ensuring the Nation is safe from cyber attack; and maintaining the Nation's fisheries at sustainable levels so that they provide both sustenance and reliable economies for the communities that depend upon them.

You have quite the job cut out for you, Secretary Locke. You must overcome the lack of foresight and planning by your predecessor for the immediate future as well as plan for the Nation's needs beyond your tenure. This Committee expects your commitment to ensure an effective Decennial Census, the launch of a robust, well-funded National Climate Service, and increasing support for science research and science education. Critical to your success will be your ability to secure the resources required by Census, NOAA, and other Commerce agencies to accomplish their roles in support of the continued prosperity of the U.S. economy and to prevent the waste that comes from poor management of major procurements such as Field Data Collection Automation and NPOESS.

As we all know, we have not yet received the President's complete budget submission. Accordingly, we don't know many of the details of the request. We will be anxious to see those details when the budget is submitted and we are sure to have additional questions at that time. The hearing transcript will remain open for two weeks after the budget's submission so as to provide Members an opportunity to submit any budget-related questions.

At this time, I would like to invite you, Secretary Locke, to offer your opening statement, but I would first like to recognize the Ranking Member, Frank Wolf, for any opening statement that he would like to make this morning.